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A Marxist influence on Wittgenstein via Sraffa

John B. Davis

Marquette University, john.davis@marquette.edu

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7 A Marxist influence on Wittgenstein via Sraffa

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This chapter looks at possible indirect influences of the Marxist tradition on the later ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein via the contact between Wittgenstein and the Italian economist Piero Sraffa. Sraffa was influenced by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (Bharadwaj, 1989; Ginzburg, 1998; Naldi, 2000), and though Wittgenstein's thinking has no apparent direct link to Gramsci's, a case can be made for saying that Sraffa had an impact on Wittgenstein that specifically reflected Gramsci's influence on him. Though the evidence that Gramsci influenced Sraffa is solid, and the evidence that Sraffa influenced Wittgenstein is equally tangible, interpreting these influences is subject to considerable controversy. Let me consequently begin by identifying the difficulties involved in making this argument, and thus suggest the way in which I attempt to make the argument in this chapter.

It is first important to emphasise that, because the connections suggested here cross boundaries between very different types of thinking – Gramsci's ideas were about politics and the state, Sraffa's were about economics, and Wittgenstein's were about traditional philosophical topics – the argument for this particular channel of influence needs to be couched in terms of broad philosophical traditions in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. In this respect, I distinguish between certain continental European and British traditions of ideas, and argue that the pathway from Gramsci to Wittgenstein through Sraffa reflects an influence of the former on the latter. Specifically, the European influence was wielded through the theoretical practice of *critique* – the notion that ideas must be evaluated in terms of their historical roles. This type of thinking stemmed from the Hegelian tradition and was largely absent in the dominant Anglophone approach to philosophy of language but, I argue, was applied to the latter by Sraffa, and then by the later Wittgenstein – at least in some part on account of Sraffa's influence. Second, I emphasise that the focus in this chapter is only on one possible influence on Wittgenstein's later ideas. I do not claim that Marxist or Sraffa's ideas were fully constitutive of Wittgenstein's later ideas or otherwise exhaust their meaning and importance. Third, a last caveat concerns this chapter's approach. Because the acknowledged and direct connections between Gramsci and Sraffa and between Sraffa and Wittgenstein are few and controversial, my argument does not proceed so much by analysing a pattern of influence,

but rather by identifying shared positions across the three individuals. Two of these shared positions are focused upon in this chapter. I argue that a Gramscian-like concept of 'catastrophic' equilibrium and a Gramscian-like concept of immanence can be found in the thinking of both Sraffa and the later Wittgenstein, though much modified in nature and used for different purposes by each.

The organisation of the chapter is as follows. In the first section I describe how Gramsci's ideas originated in his thinking about political power and theory of the state as a means of maintaining class hegemony. Then I set forth his ideas in connection with the European tradition of critique, in order to explain the origins of his two notions of catastrophic equilibrium and immanence. In the second section I turn to Sraffa to show his attachment to the European tradition of critique and also the way in which he draws on these two fundamental Gramscian ideas in emphasising monopoly in the market system and the idea of what I call 'justified abstraction'. Here the focus is Sraffa's critique of Alfred Marshall's ideas about equilibrium rather than his later economics. In the third section I briefly describe the critical encounter between Sraffa and Wittgenstein. Then I discuss Wittgenstein's later ideas to argue that they show a similar attachment to the European tradition of critique, while making use of notions like catastrophic equilibrium and immanence in the explanation of rule-following in language-games and the concept of family resemblance. The fourth and last section makes concluding comments about the interaction between continental European and British traditions of ideas, based on the displacement of Sraffa and Wittgenstein from Europe in the period of war and turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century. Here I attempt to say a few things about what make for 'revolutionary' developments in ideas.

Gramsci and the tradition of critique: catastrophic equilibrium and immanence

Hegel's contribution to the idea of critique came in the form of his account of dialectical development of thought, whereby one form of thought is evaluated and taken up in subsequent, more complex forms. Marx made this process historical and material, and placed classes in conflict and opposition to one another in order to demonstrate the working out of the process. Gramsci, caught up in and leading the political struggles of the working class in Italy at the beginning of the century, brought Marx's thinking to bear on the contest for power. Central to this was a changed view of the state. The Social Democratic Second International had treated such institutions as the Church, the schools and universities, unions, political parties, the media, etc., as repressive apparatuses on analogy to coercive state apparatuses such as the police, the courts, the prisons, the army and the government, but had still defined the state instrumentally as a class dictatorship based on the exercise of brute force. Gramsci, beginning in his early *Ordine Nuovo* period, however, developed a theory of ideological state apparatuses based on his concept of hegemony. Exercising state power meant more

than just controlling the machinery of government. It also meant organising class domination through the creation of a world view within 'private', non-state institutions. In this latter respect, the dominant class or class fraction exercises hegemony and intellectual and moral leadership (*direzione*) that complements its exercise of brute force. State power, in effect, insinuates itself throughout a whole array of non-state social institutions.

Gramsci's use of the concept of critique involved an unveiling of hidden structures of power. By locating instruments of class domination within what were conventionally regarded as non-state institutions, he showed that these institutions were not benign with respect to class conflict, while at the same time exposing their ideological nature. He thus advanced the understanding of the Italian political process by demonstrating an unappreciated historical role played by ideas in that process. This meant that the idea of the state operative in the European Social Democratic parties of the time needed to be abandoned. The state was not simply an agent or instrument of big monopoly capital. With political power operating through a range of non-state institutions, different ruling class factions exercised different types of power in different arenas. Italy was at a point, Gramsci believed, at which these different factions were on the verge of immobilising each other, thus jeopardising the overall class power of the bourgeoisie, with a severe political crisis a possible outcome. In such circumstances, an 'heroic' personality might emerge to create a dictatorship, because the forces in conflict '*balance each other in a catastrophic manner*, that is to say, they balance each other in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction' (Gramsci, 1971: 219; emphasis added). This balance was framed as a kind of equilibrium – a catastrophic equilibrium – by Gramsci. 'In the modern world, the equilibrium with catastrophic prospects occurs ... between forces whose opposition is historically incurable' (Gramsci, 1971: 222).

Thus Gramsci's critique of conventional notions of the state, bourgeois and Social Democratic, generated a new conceptual device to help account for the process. How are we to understand this concept? The idea of a catastrophic equilibrium involves a rejection of the holist idea of society as a unified totality, albeit a totality explained in terms of class domination. The holist concept of a totality implies both that the social whole includes its parts, and that the parts acquire their meaning according to their integration within the whole. But Gramsci's view of a catastrophic equilibrium is of an unsustainable juxtaposition of opposed and discordant forces, the resolution of which in the form of a new class hegemony destroys one side of this opposition, rather than raising it up and preserving it in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*. The parts of the social whole consequently do not acquire their meaning from the whole, because they seek to be exclusive of one another, re-casting the whole solely in terms of their own image. The idea of a catastrophic equilibrium is thus that of an unstable, transient balance in a state of affairs, one in which past and future can be radically disjoined in an unpredictable and abrupt manner. In effect, history rather than logic explained the evolution of societies.

Gramsci's critique of the instrumental conception of the form of the state also had as an underlying foundation a parallel critique of economism, the notion that there exist objective laws of historical development similar to natural laws that determine the path and character of political struggle. His ideas had grown out of his experience as a leader of the working-class movement in the Turin factory councils. Placing importance on linking theory and practice, he understood Marx to be the founder of the philosophy of praxis that combined British political economy, German idealist philosophy and French revolutionary politics. However, he believed (Gramsci, 1971: 388 ff.) that Marx's philosophy had subsequently been mistakenly given both an idealist interpretation (in Italy particularly by Croce, briefly a Marxist) and a philosophical materialist interpretation (by orthodox Marxists Plekhanov and Bukharin). Both interpretations exhibited a tendency to rely on metaphysical rather than historical explanations, which had the effect of substituting arguments between intellectuals and party members for investigation of the historical struggle of the working class. He thus called for recovery of Marx's original tripartite nexus, characterising it specifically as *immanentist* in being based upon a thoroughly historicised understanding of the concrete and material development of history: 'The philosophy of praxis continues the philosophy of immanence but purifies it of all its metaphysical apparatus and brings it onto the concrete terrain of history' (Gramsci, 1971: 450).

Gramsci's immanentist interpretation of the philosophy of praxis – alternatively, his rejection of all forms of transcendence – is specifically a doctrine regarding the interpretation of generality or universals in the Hegelian tradition. Hegel, following Kant's rejection of the idea of bare particulars ('intuitions without concepts are blind'), similarly rejected the idea of an abstract universal, arguing in favour of concrete universals which require more 'intimate' relation with the particulars they involve. Needless to say, the sense in which concrete universals involve their particulars is philosophically complex and also subject to a range of interpretations within the Hegelian tradition. Moreover, just how Gramsci believed the concept of a concrete universal was to be understood has been subject to considerable controversy. Nonetheless, his rejection of the idea of transcendence, for example, as expressed in his assertion that 'man is historical becoming' justifies saying that he rejected the idea of an abstract universal. It is this development of the European tradition of critique, I suggest, that most clearly represents his philosophical side. Together with his characterisation of the historical process in terms of the idea of catastrophic equilibrium, it represents two key aspects of his Marxism that can be re-located in modified form in Sraffa's early economic thinking.

Sraffa and critique of neo-classical economics: monopoly and justified abstraction

Sraffa was forced to flee Italy after Mussolini came to power. Prior to his arrival in Cambridge, he had regular contact with Gramsci, and though he was a supporter of the working class, his degree of attachment to Gramsci's particular

political positions is unclear. Later, however, after Gramsci's imprisonment, Sraffa became important for him as a contact with the outside world. Gramsci also drew upon Sraffa's assistance for books and materials for the writing of what subsequently became his *Prison Notebooks*. Sraffa, in turn, maintained his working-class political allegiance, though his work was almost exclusively devoted to reconstructing economic theory. This latter began with his critique of key assumptions of Marshallian neo-classical economics (Sraffa, 1925; 1926; cf. Maneschi, 1986), then continued with his editing of the writings of the classical economist David Ricardo, and finally culminated in his radical reconstruction of economic thinking in his book *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* (Sraffa, 1960).

My focus in this chapter is on Sraffa's critical evaluation of Alfred Marshall's neo-classical economic ideas as the first clear evidence that a method of reasoning encountered through Gramsci was to have a key place in Sraffa's own work. It is true that Sraffa's later *Production of Commodities* was more explicitly designed as a work of critique, specifically of neo-classical economic concepts of production and capital. But Sraffa's known reported impact on Wittgenstein in the 1920s (cf. Malcolm, 1958; Roncaglia, 1978; Davis, 1988; Andrews, 1996), subsequently acknowledged by Wittgenstein in the preface to his *Philosophical Investigations*, came before Sraffa had gone very far in developing his *Production of Commodities* thinking. Moreover, though Sraffa and Wittgenstein continued to be in contact with one another in Cambridge after this time, there is little evidence that Sraffa's subsequent work on *Production of Commodities* figured in either their conversations or the development of Wittgenstein's philosophical thinking.

How, then, did Sraffa develop his critical approach in his papers on Marshall? Central to this question is Sraffa's critical treatment of Marshall's understanding of independence between industries (cf. Panico and Salvadori, 1994; Mongiovi, 1996). Marshall's partial equilibrium method of analysis of separate industry supply functions makes industries relatively independent in the sense that a change in the quantity of output produced by one industry leaves the quantities produced by other industries unchanged. But this involved a short-run analysis, and changes in one industry's output raised the question of whether in the long run there were diminishing or increasing returns to scale: that is, whether average costs of all industries rose or fell with the expansion of any one industry. In one respect, supposing that this occurred was compatible with Marshall's analysis of industry independence. If variations in an industry's output operated directly only on the cost function of the representative firm of that industry, this affected the price in that industry, which might subsequently affect prices in other industries, possibly causing further changes in their cost functions. But these latter influences were indirect (in the sense that they were conveyed through the change in other industry costs), and were compatible with Marshall's assumption of a relative independence between industries. However, were variation in a single industry's output to operate directly on the cost function of representative firms in all industries, then the industries were mutually interdependent, and Marshall's partial equilibrium analysis broke down.

Marshall had tried to argue that increasing and diminishing returns were of the sort compatible with the first case. In the case of diminishing returns, he assumed that an increase in industry output required more intensive use of some primary factor of production in scarce supply but only in the expanding industry. Thus there were only indirect and no direct effects on other industries. Sraffa, however, argued that it was highly unlikely that such primary factors were used in just one industry. In the increasing returns case, Marshall had to assume that such returns were external to the firm and internal to the industry of which it was a part, so that they directly affected the cost function of the representative firm of the industry, but only indirectly affected those of representative firms in other industries. Sraffa noted, however, that Marshall had been fully cognisant of the fact that, in the real world, there were increasing returns external to both the firm and the industry. Thus in both cases (diminishing and increasing returns) Marshall's analysis could not support his initial conception of the relative independence of industries.

To see the significance of these arguments, it is important to recognise that a particular concept of economic equilibrium was at the centre of the debate. Marshall's motivation for treating industries as relatively independent from one another had been to provide an account of price on an industry-by-industry basis in terms of symmetrically opposed forces of supply and demand. Essentially, each industry could be understood solely in terms of its own underlying supply and demand conditions, because changes in the supply conditions of any one industry had only indirect effects on the supply conditions of the others. But when Marshall's highly restrictive assumptions about the nature of returns were ruled out, so that indirect effects of changes in an industry's output on the cost functions of other industries were replaced by direct effects, then the underlying forces determining industry prices could neither be compartmentalised on an industry-by-industry basis, nor were they any longer describable in terms of the symmetrically opposed forces of supply and demand. In effect, the forces determining industry prices were communicated through a network of cross-cutting production relationships between industries that transferred the effects of changes in cost of production in any one industry to the prices of all industries (cf. Davis, 1993).

The idea that supply-and-demand forces operated everywhere in essentially the same way made historical development an insignificant factor in explaining markets. Indeed, that the same principles always operated in the same manner made supply and demand timeless sorts of principles much like laws of nature. Sraffa rejected this conception of the economic world, and believed that laws in economics were historically specific. To bring this understanding to bear on neo-classical economics involved showing that the key concept of equilibrium which Marshall employed was not adequate for explaining markets, and in fact was not even adequate on its own terms. That is, because it was internally inconsistent, Marshall's account could not sustain his view of markets in supply-and-demand, partial equilibrium terms. Moreover, the way in which that account broke down demonstrated that a more historical understanding of equilibrium forces in

markets was needed. For Sraffa, that more historical understanding led to a conception of capitalist economies as subject to a process of radically discontinuous change, in which conditions supporting a temporarily settled state of affairs also contained the seeds of a disruption of that state of affairs. Sraffa's conclusion to his 1926 critique of Marshall was thus that the competitive market system, as Marshall had explained it, ultimately collapsed once a more realistic view of increasing returns was incorporated in it.

How, then, do these ideas relate in particular to Gramsci's concepts of catastrophic equilibrium and immanence? I suggest that Sraffa used the former in connection with his understanding of the development of monopoly in markets, and used the latter in connection with his understanding of what was involved in making justifiable abstractions in economics.

The idea that equilibrium is a temporarily settled state of affairs that contains the seeds of its own breakdown is not unlike Gramsci's use of the concept of catastrophic equilibrium. In his 1920s account, Sraffa argues that the development of monopoly is a likely outcome of increasing returns that remain internal to the representative firm of an industry. Monopolies then develop not only at the expense of other firms, but also at the expense of the system of balanced competition that Marshall saw as the essential characteristic of the market system. Thus the presence of internal increasing returns across industries signalled an unstable and transient set of circumstances in which market power and barriers to entry would ultimately replace a system of free competition. The equilibrium Sraffa described as being implicit in Marshall's thinking was consequently catastrophic in Gramsci's sense of the term in that it characterised 'forces whose opposition is historically incurable'.

Sraffa's critique of Marshall's treatment of variable returns was also accompanied by a complaint about his methodology (Davis, 1998). The classical economists, Sraffa noted, had understood diminishing and increasing returns to be rooted in dissimilar economic phenomena, and accordingly did not explain them at a higher level of abstraction as instances of one general type of principle. Marshall, accordingly, 'found it necessary to introduce certain modifications into the form of the two laws' as inherited from the classical economists, in order to merge them into a 'single "law" of nonproportional returns' (Sraffa, 1926: 537). This reflected Marshall's conviction that 'the essential causes determining the price of particular commodities may be simplified and grouped together' so as to explain prices in markets solely in terms of the 'forces of demand and supply' (Sraffa, 1926: 535). Clearly Sraffa thought this recourse to abstraction and 'essential causes' unjustified. Without saying what his view of proper abstraction was, we can say that, for Sraffa, what was objectionable in Marshall's methodology was its recourse to abstraction understood in terms of other abstractions, rather than in terms of the relevant underlying concrete phenomena. Sraffa, then, did have an understanding of justifiable abstraction. It probably goes too far to regard this understanding as involving a commitment to an immanentist idea of a concrete universal, especially since Sraffa's ideas are elaborated in terms of arguments about the equilibrium

concept in economics rather than in terms of an appraisal of historical forces that was Gramsci's concern. Nonetheless, the motivation is similar in each. Both tie concepts and generalisation closely to the historical process, and reject the idea that concepts and generalisation operate in a timeless, transcendental space. Thus it seems fair to say that Sraffa drew on Gramsci's thinking in his own first significant attempt at critique in economics.

Wittgenstein and the critique of meaning: rule-following and family resemblance

The episode in which Sraffa is said to have caused Wittgenstein to doubt his early *Tractatus* ([1921] 1961) framework involved a critique of that early framework. Wittgenstein had understood the meaning of a term to be the object which that term names, and had then sought to explain language as a configuration of names that could be mapped out in a logical structure of thought. Sraffa, however, asked Wittgenstein to explain to him the logical form of a gesture, giving as an example a famous Italian gesture used to express contempt (Malcolm, 1958). A gesture, of course, has its meaning in specific contexts, and thus cannot be grasped purely as a piece of language. In posing his question to Wittgenstein, then, Sraffa required that Wittgenstein consider how concepts function in practical settings. Indeed, the gesture in question could be delivered in an obscene manner. Thus Sraffa also unveiled meaning hidden from ordinary view, since one had to understand context to know whether a gesture had this additional dimension.

When Wittgenstein abandoned his *Tractatus* picture theory of meaning, he recognised that representation is only one of the uses to which language is put. Thus, understanding how language is used in particular practices in people's everyday experience is as important as understanding its representational features. 'Look at the sentence as an instrument, and at its sense as its employment,' Wittgenstein said (1958: §421). This was famously explained in terms of the idea of a 'language-game', or the idea that language is used in localised connections to accomplish particular kinds of things. A language-game, moreover, is linked to the notion of a 'form of life'. '[T]he term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life' (*ibid.*: §23). Both of these notions, it seems fair to say, reflect a kind of critique not unlike that which we see in Gramsci and Sraffa. In the first place, understanding concepts and ideas depends on placing them in their practical context. Second, doing so often reveals features of those concepts and ideas that are otherwise not obvious. In effect, in his later philosophy, Wittgenstein problematises the whole notion of 'language itself' as an object of study.

How, then, ought one to understand a language-game? Central to Wittgenstein's answer is his treatment of how to follow the rules of a game. Following a rule competently depends upon seeing how that rule functions in its language-game, within the form of life in which it is embedded. This is fundamentally a *practical* rather than an *intellectual* (interpretive) task: 'any interpretation

still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning' (*ibid.*: §198). In effect, then, obeying a rule entails commitment to a set of practices and, Wittgenstein emphasises, ultimately has to be done 'blindly' (*ibid.*: §219). Indeed, to only 'think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule' (*ibid.*: §202). This presents a far different picture of rules and rule-following from that found in a purely language-oriented point of view. When rules and rule-following are a part of a set of activities and entire forms of life, they are interwoven with other rules and practices rather than being discrete entities. This further complicates the meanings we give to words which become in fact 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' that at most have a 'family resemblance' to one another (*ibid.*: §66).

How do these ideas relate to those advanced for Gramsci and Sraffa above? My argument is that the chief points of contact between these ideas of Wittgenstein and those of Gramsci and Sraffa arise from the former's emphasis on rule-following and family resemblance. Rule-following relates to the emphasis Gramsci and Sraffa place on equilibria (or settled states of affairs of any sort) as being transitory and temporary. Family resemblance relates to their understanding of reasonable abstraction and generalisation.

The idea that equilibrium might be catastrophic may seem foreign to Wittgenstein's later ideas. But a less dramatic rendering of the term 'catastrophic' as unstable and changeable can be argued to capture an important dimension of Wittgenstein's understanding of what is involved in following rules in a language-game. Following a rule is not a matter of associating the past uses of a term with their occasions of use, and then inductively applying that term in like circumstances in the future. Following a rule presupposes a commitment to participate in the form of life in which that language-game is played. Such commitment on the part of many individuals establishes a framework in which meanings may evolve, as when individuals apply and accept the use of a term in new contexts. Consequently, if we see language-games as having equilibrium-like properties, in the sense that a collection of meanings within a language-game at any one time possess a set of relatively identifiable relationships towards one another, then because these relationships may be transformed and reconfigured as the language-game is played, these equilibrium relationships may also become 'unstable' and 'changeable'.

Wittgenstein's idea of the meaning of a concept as a family resemblance suggests much the same idea, though in a more static sense. Putting aside change in meaning, a concept at any one time constitutes a combination of applications and senses that stand in uncertain relation to one another, since no central or essential sense unites all the ways in which the concept may be used. Thus, the family resemblance notion suggests that concepts are like equilibria that contain discordant elements – a notion not far removed from Gramsci's catastrophic equilibrium idea.

Wittgenstein's *Investigations* philosophy is often seen as a rejection of metaphysics and of the forms of abstraction on which metaphysics depends. But this

hardly implies that he rejected the very idea of generality itself. Rather, for Wittgenstein, generality is a product of family resemblance – the generality of a concept is produced out of the myriad overlapping and criss-crossing senses in which that concept is used. This means, however, that since there is no single – therefore essential – meaning shared by all of the ways in which an expression is used, we accordingly have no way of specifying concepts apart from describing their actual uses and conditions of application. Indeed, it seems for Wittgenstein that the entire business of investigating abstract concepts is suspect. Thus while it may be awkward to use the idea of a concrete universal in connection with Wittgenstein's later views, nonetheless his image of a concept as being constituted out of a family resemblance effectively embeds particularity of use in the very idea of generality.

In offering these remarks about rule-following and family resemblance here, I do not wish to enter into the voluminous debates between philosophers over the meaning and significance of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Rather, the purpose here is to attempt to show how Wittgenstein's later orientation may have connections to a critical tradition of ideas that was introduced into Cambridge by Sraffa. What seems interesting in this attempt is that it makes a case for a Marxist influence, albeit translated and indirect, on the later Wittgenstein. The strength of this case, however, depends in part on seeing different traditions of ideas as coming into contact. Prior to his return to Cambridge in the 1920s Wittgenstein was entirely at home in the early analytic, logical atomist philosophy of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore. But then he came into contact with Sraffa, to whom he records, in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, his indebtedness 'for the most consequential ideas of this book' (1958: x). I close, then, by looking very briefly at the issue of interacting traditions of ideas.

Interaction of European and British ideas: the displacement of Sraffa and Wittgenstein

My argument in this chapter is that a European tradition of ideas deriving originally from Hegel played a role in the later development of Anglophone philosophy of language, and specifically had an impact on the later thinking of Wittgenstein by way of Sraffa. Moreover, the particular interpretation of Hegel's thinking involved came by way of Marxism, as formulated by Gramsci in his philosophy of praxis. The argument that Sraffa was the key intermediary may seem odd on the surface, since Wittgenstein was Austrian and should have been no less aware of the critical tradition in European thinking than Sraffa. Were this true, there would not have been a role for Sraffa in influencing Wittgenstein's later ideas. But as is well known, Wittgenstein was not well acquainted with or interested in the Hegelian tradition. Also, although he had an interest at one point in socialism (and visited Russia in the hope of seeing socialism in practice), he had very little appreciation for Marxism either as a body of ideas or as a political programme. Accordingly, his early work is entirely consonant with work already carried on in Cambridge by Russell, Moore and others. Sraffa's subse-

quent contact with Wittgenstein can accordingly be seen as a vehicle for bringing the European critical tradition – or at least its thrust – to his attention.

Wittgenstein's later work is often regarded as revolutionary. It is revolutionary in that it not only challenged his own (and Russell's and Moore's early ideas), but in that it brought into question the entire approach to philosophy of language dominant in Britain at the time. Wittgenstein's earlier *Tractatus*, while a remarkable contribution, was not revolutionary in the way in which the later *Investigations* was. Why, then, did Wittgenstein become 'revolutionary' in his later work? This long-debated and perhaps unanswerable question has usually been examined in terms of Wittgenstein's genius as a philosopher and his personal intellectual development, and has been little investigated in terms of Sraffa's possible influence on Wittgenstein. But this seems to presuppose that developments within philosophy derive entirely from the nature of ideas within philosophy. It is reasonable to think, of course, that ideas from economics or even politics would not be influential in changing ideas in philosophy. No doubt this has led some to disregard Sraffa's known influence on Wittgenstein. But the argument here is that it was Sraffa's philosophical views – not his economics – that influenced Wittgenstein. Sraffa presumably never explained Marshall's partial equilibrium analysis to Wittgenstein. Rather, he applied the sort of philosophical critique he had advanced against Marshall to Wittgenstein's early assumptions.

However, I am not attempting here to explain the revolutionary nature of Wittgenstein's later philosophy in terms of Sraffa's *personal* influence. I am suggesting, rather, that individuals are bearers of intellectual traditions, and that it is their contact with one another as such bearers that produces revolutionary changes in ideas. Thus Sraffa's displacement from Italy to Britain by the rise of Mussolini brought two histories of ideas into proximity with one another that had previously been largely separate. But there is a special dimension to this particular occasion of contact. When such contacts occur, more often than not, communication between individuals is not successful, because their different paradigmatic orientations involve such different structures and organisation of ideas as to effectively preclude it. Certainly Sraffa was not the only individual working in Britain whose intellectual antecedents were not familiar or at home there. Nor was he the only such individual with whom Wittgenstein came into contact. But his particular inheritance – the critical tradition – offered a means of engagement with British intellectual work which other non-British traditions may not have possessed. That is, by showing contradictions in Marshall's neo-classical system that derived from its critique as a system of ideas functioning within an historical framework, Sraffa was able to make relevant his own thinking about the market economy. Sraffa's ideas were revolutionary in economics, then, specifically because they were from the European critical tradition that often operated by revealing a hidden 'historicist' dimension to systems of ideas which claimed to be timeless and universal in their abstraction. And such revelation could be the undoing precisely of their claims to universality.

Wittgenstein arguably took up his revolutionary mantle from Sraffa through this particular intermediation. By exposing his own earlier ideas to critical examination, he demonstrated the place and priority of his later framework. Again, this is far from saying that the content of Sraffa's thinking about economics is what is revolutionary in the later Wittgenstein. Rather, it is to say that Wittgenstein's later philosophical ideas were revolutionary because they presupposed the same philosophical posture of critique that Sraffa's (and Gramsci's) approaches possessed. In the British thinking of the first half of the twentieth century, which largely lacked a way of reflexively seeing ideas functioning within historical and social contexts, bringing this way of thinking to meaning and language was indeed revolutionary. Thus it seems that revolutionary shifts in ideas may not be so much a matter of what individuals reason and argue (though this is not to deny Sraffa and Wittgenstein's respective remarkable intellectual abilities). Rather, such shifts seem to come about because of confrontations between entire traditions of ideas. Some such confrontations, obviously, are more productive than others. In the instance examined here, a particularly productive confrontation in traditions of ideas has been argued to have involved the reformulation and re-application of ideas central to the Marxist tradition to twentieth-century philosophy of language in Britain.¹

Note

- 1 I am indebted to Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants for helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

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